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OVERVIEW OF THE US FOREST SERVICE PROGRAMS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP, CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF SUCCESS IN NATURAL RESOURCES: MOVING OUTREACH FORWARD IN CONSERVATION

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The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is a multi-faceted agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that administers the nation's 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands. These lands encompass 193 million acres in 43 states, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Managing approximately 25% of federal lands, the USFS is the only major national land agency outside the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The Forest Service mission is, "to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations." Its motto is "caring for the land and serving people." As the lead federal agency in natural resource conservation, the Forest Service provides leadership in the protection, management and use of the nation's forest, rangeland, and aquatic ecosystems. The agency's ecosystem approach to management integrates ecological, economic, and social factors to maintain and enhance the quality of the environment to meet current and future needs. Through implementation of land and resource management plans, the agency ensures sustainable ecosystems by restoring and maintaining species diversity and ecological productivity that helps provide recreation, water, timber, minerals, fish, wildlife, wilderness, and aesthetic values for current and future generations.

The Forest Service employs 34,250 people in 750 locations, including 10,050 firefighters, 737 law enforcement personnel, and 500 scientists. It augments our work through partnerships with public and private agencies that help it to plant trees, improve trails, educate the public and improve conditions in wildland/urban interfaces and rural areas, just to name a few. USFS also promotes sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation internationally. Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the Forest Service, summed up the goal of the Forest Service, "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run."

The Forest Service organization includes ranger districts, national forests, regions, research stations and research work units. Each level has responsibility for a variety of functions. Major Forest Service divisions include:

- National Forest System
- State and Private Forestry
- Research and Development
- International Programs
- Law Enforcement and Investigations
- Business Operations

The Southern Region of the Forest Service is a dynamic collection of lands, cared for by people as a legacy for future generations. It believes that benefits to people flow from healthy land, that healthy land is conserved through wise management, and that management is most effective when shared. The Southern Region encompasses 13 States (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) as well as Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands. Also known as Region 8, the Southern Region is one of nine geographical regions within the Forest Service.

Although managing national forests and grasslands is a core part of the USFS's mission, the Forest Service's operations are closely tied to working with state forestry agencies and private landowners. The 1978 Cooperative Forestry Act allows the Forest Service to provide financial and technical assistance to private landowners, state agencies, tribes and community resource managers to help sustain the United States' urban and rural forests and protect communities and the environment from wildland fires, insects, diseases, and invasive plants. It also enables the Forest Service to conduct strategic outreach and provide conservation assistance efforts to private forest landowners, small farmers and ranchers, tribal groups, community-based organizations, veterans, and youth. These efforts have largely been successful in stemming the tide of land-use changes and preventing the loss of forestland to development.

The Cooperative Forestry Program in State and Private Forestry delivers its work through state forestry agencies and other partners. Programs like Forest Legacy, Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, and Wood Innovations are tools the Forest Service, states and communities use to address and sustain trees and forested landscapes. USFS collaborates with its partners to create nature-based solutions and strive to ensure all Americans receive the clean air, water and natural areas they need to thrive.

Forestry and forest products are important economic components for the South. Forestland is one of the major land uses and offers social, environmental and economic opportunities for landowners. Forestland is overwhelming in the hands of approximately 4.3 million nonindustrial private forest (NIPF) private landowners. In fact, more than 89% of the 245 million acres of forestland is privately owned, leaving only a small share in the hands of federal entities, like the USFS and other public agencies. Therefore, successful forest conservation can only be achieved by engaging private landowners.

Most NIPF landowners are not realizing the full benefits of their forestlands. African American landowners and others with small- to mid-sized tracts of land generally lack forestry knowledge and training. Therefore, their lands are often less productive and more often neglected than those of other ownership categories. These landowners are also frequently unfamiliar with the range of federal and state agencies and/or programs available to them.

The southeastern U.S. continues to face the reality of the ongoing loss of African American family-owned land. Whether through economic pressures, inequitable access and distribution of resources, under-participation in government-sponsored programs, or heirs' property issues, many minority landowners have historically not fully benefited from their land-based assets.

To address this trend, the USFS has a long history of collaboration with Tuskegee University, other land grant institutions and many community-based organizations to conduct outreach and deliver technical assistance and financial assistance to African American landowners.

The following list highlights some of the long-standing partners:

- Tuskegee University: Long-standing partnership and the Annual Professional Agricultural Workers Conference
- Southern University: Long-standing partnership Liaison Officer focused on the Urban and Community Forestry Program
- The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
- The Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Inc.
- The Winston County Self-Help Cooperative, Youth Conference/Field Day
- The Minority Landowner Magazine
- Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, Inc. (sustainable forestry/land retention efforts)
- Alcorn State University (Urban and Community Forestry)
- University of Maryland, Eastern Shore (Urban and Community Forestry)
- U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities and Project Partners

In 2012, the Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U. S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities partnered to form the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention (SFLR) program. The SFLR program is a comprehensive effort to foster stronger, more economically viable families, healthier communities and improved ecosystem sustainability, by resolving land ownership issues and helping families become engaged in sustainable forestry. Anchor organizations with credibility, located in forested rural regions with high African American populations, were selected to lead support networks made up of public and private forestry services organizations. SFLR is currently supporting six organizations in five multi-county regions in South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, and Georgia.

Recognizing the importance of diverse landownership, the partnership invested more than \$8 million to restore and secure ownership of threatened southern African American-owned forestland and improve increasing forest landowner income and land asset value through sustainable forestry. The project will introduce new forestry technologies, create trust, generate comprehensive and replicable systems of landowner outreach and support and develop income streams by connecting forest owners to traditional and emerging forest products markets.

In the last four years, the program has already seen very concrete results:

- More than 600 landowners are involved in the program
- 161 landowners already received a forest stewardship plan and 136 landowners are in the process of getting theirs
- More than 335 forestry practices have been implemented on landowners' properties, including site preparation, reforestation, thinning, prescribed burning and firebreaks
- 232 landowners received a will or completed their estate plans

Conservation of forestland in the South begins with the private landowner. Through this initiative and many others, the Forest Service continues its commitment to ensure it does all it can to empower and encourage landowners in forest stewardship.